

Seattle-King County Health Care for the Homeless Network

Creating a Health Conscious Culture At Your Homeless Program Site

Adapted from a May 12, 2005 presentation at the Washington State Coalition for the Homeless Annual Conference

Heather Barr, RN, Public Health Nurse, Health Care for the Homeless, Public Health—Seattle & King County (206) 296-4656 or 296-5091 heather.barr@metrokc.gov

Homelessness and Health

Compared to living in a home, experiencing homelessness brings:

- More exposure to violence & the elements
- Crowded living conditions and greater exposure to communicable diseases
- Poor nutrition
- Lack of adequate hygiene
- Greater fatigue, stress, & depression
- Negative impact on the immune system
- Higher rates of infectious diseases and chronic illness
- Higher rates of mental health & substance use disorders
- Higher death rates (about 3 to 4 times higher)

Common Health Conditions

- 26% have infectious conditions
 - Such as colds, bronchitis, pneumonia, STDs, etc.
- 46% have one or more chronic health conditions
 - Hypertension, diabetes, asthma, etc.
- Skin disorders, gastrointestinal ailments, musculo-skeletal problems, dental & vision problems, mental health & substance abuse disorders

Common Obstacles to Health Care

- Language & cultural barriers
- Unaware of what services are available
- Lack of insurance
- Other priorities in life (getting shelter & food)
- Attitudes of health care providers
- Scheduling difficulties
- Distrust of institutions
- Lack of comprehensive services
- Lack of continuity of care
- Lack of transportation & child care

Creating a Health Conscious Culture at Your Site

1. Communicate Your Site's Intentions and Expectations about Health as Soon as the Client Crosses the Threshold

You can help stop infectious diseases at the door with **five simple *symptom* questions**:

1. How are you feeling today?
2. Have you been coughing more than usual lately? (What diseases might you be thinking of?)
3. Have you been having diarrhea or vomiting today? (Should this person have any kitchen duties? *No.*)
4. Have you been troubled by a rash or very itchy skin or scalp?
5. Do you have any sores or injuries that are not healed over?

What does the health component of your intake look like?

- The importance of clear, kind language in the intake form; compassionate, consistent health-messages.
- What information do you collect, and what do you do with it?
- What level of detail do you really need for your site? Don't collect information that you don't need or use.

Symptom questions—such as the five listed above--can help you plan and prevent spread:

- Coughers may need to be “isolated”, monitored, referred. Offer mask if needed.
- Treat the laundry of the itchy with extra care! Refer to care if lice or scabies is suspected.
- Place the vomiting/diarrhea clients near bathroom, supply with basin, towel, hand sanitizer.
- Make sure the client has band aids or dressings to cover wounds, refer to care as needed.

Communicate your intention clearly, kindly, compassionately, considerately

- “Because we all share the same air and space here, we have to be especially careful about germs getting around.”
- “We have a few rules about health to keep everyone safe.”
- “I need to ask you a few personal questions. This is to help give you the best care we can while you are here.”
- “This information is not meant to keep you from staying here, we just need to know how to best care for you while you are here.”
- “In order to make your stay here more comfortable and safe I have to ask you about your health.”

At some sites, a more expanded health intake may be appropriate.

- “Do you have any health issues or concerns that we should know about? Anything like diabetes, heart problems, kidney or bladder problems, breathing problems, seizures, allergies, problems moving around, emotional or mental health problems?” [*Note: these are the kinds of common conditions that could really impact your program, so they are useful to know about.*]
- “Do you have a doctor or other health care provider that you prefer to go to?”
- “Are you taking any medications at this time?”
- “Are you supposed to be taking any medications?”
- “Can you tell me what you take these medicines for?”
- “Do you have a supply of these medicines?”
- “Do you have any trouble taking your medicine?”
- Gentle inquiry with explanation helps build trust fast.
- Remember that your clients are often asked to give up lots of information, some may wish to withhold information for many reasons.

Some questions that are *not* very helpful:

- Stigma-laden questions such as “*do you have lice?*” or “*do you have any communicable diseases?*” are less likely to elicit open responses than symptom-focused questions.
- “*When was your last TB test? Was it positive?*” Many homeless people have a positive TB skin test because they have latent (dormant) TB infection, which is not a contagious condition. Homeless agencies should focus on symptoms of **active** TB disease. People with active TB are contagious and can spread the disease to others. Most useful is to ask about and observe for symptoms of active TB disease (coughing more than usual, weight loss, night sweats).

2. Management Must Communicate Expectations about Health and Safety as Part of Orientation and in an On-going Fashion. Staff Must Have Tools and Support to Implement Best Practices Regarding Health

Best-practice guidelines, self-assessments

Health and Safety Committees (recommend having a couple of your site’s guests participate on this committee)

Health Policies:

1. Staff Health
2. General Cleaning
3. Kitchen Hygiene
4. Laundry
5. Blood-Borne Pathogens/Universal Precautions
6. Lice and scabies control policies
7. TB Prevention and Control policy
8. Emergency/Disaster Policies
9. Medication Policy

10. Policy on keeping & retaining guest attendance logs or tenant lists (legible, full names of persons, dates they stayed).

Training for staff:

1. Communicable Disease Control
2. First Aid in the shelter setting
3. Emergency/Disaster Plan Implementation
4. Food safety (if applicable)
5. Recognition and reporting of child abuse and elder abuse (as applicable)

Gear-Up:

1. First Aid Kits
2. Disaster Supplies
3. Personal Protective Equipment

3. Communicate Your Intentions and Expectations About Health to Your Clients**Information and Referral Options**

1. Designated personnel
2. Signs, files, pamphlets, posters
3. Newsletters to include health and safety information
4. Bulletin Boards

Hygiene and Health Groups for Clients

1. Staff-facilitated
2. Consider separate men's and women's groups
3. Community partners: seek out guest speakers/presenters (local clinic RN, Community Extension, Health Department, Diabetes Association, drug and alcohol recovery centers, STD clinic, Parenting groups, American Cancer Society, schools of social work, nursing, medicine, alternative medicine schools, local fire department)

Involve Your Guests in Health and Safety Dialogues

1. Survey, poll to get information about health and safety concerns
2. Conduct focus groups to get detailed information from guests
3. Food choices - if site provides food, offer healthiest possible food choices; try to address special nutrition needs of pregnant women, diabetics, and others

4. Create Environments that Encourage Health and Discourage Disease

1. Post mission statement, it should have language addressing your site's perspective on health
2. Budget for hygiene supplies
3. Trusting relationships are key to opening conversations about health, provide some private space for confidential conversations
4. Posters for increasing awareness of respiratory hygiene (cover your cough) (TB symptoms) (use of masks)
5. Posters for hand washing awareness
6. Posters that discourage sharing personal items

7. Posters that advertise local clinics, special events, health fairs
8. Pamphlets about health issues
9. Wall mounted tissue boxes, trash cans in conspicuous places
10. Wall mounted alcohol-based hand-sanitizer dispensers, signs encouraging use
11. Appropriate childproofing (if site serves children)

In Summary

- **Intake procedures can help stop germs at the door.**
- **Identify the ill, plan care and placement accordingly, and refer to care ASAP.**
- **Staff training will raise awareness of communicable disease issues and policies.**
- **Your environment can be modified to assist you in germ control.**

Sample Policies and Guidelines

The following sample policies, protocols, and guidelines are available from Seattle-King County Health Care for the Homeless Network. They have been developed by the HCHN Public Health Nurse and can be mailed or e-mailed to you on request. Call us at (206) 296-5091 to request a copy.

- Basic Health & Safety Standards / Communicable Disease Control
- Universal Precautions
- Staff health
- Sample blood/body fluid exposure policy
- General cleaning
- Kitchen hygiene
- Laundry
- Lice
- Scabies

Tools & Publications of Interest to Homeless Programs

The Health Care of Homeless Persons: A Manual of Communicable Diseases & Common Problems in Shelters & on the Streets. James J. O'Connell MD, editor. 384 pages. June 2004. Available for \$15 at www.nhchc.org – go to “Publications.” Can also be viewed free on-line.

“Bugs that Bite: Helping Homeless Patients and Shelter Staff Cope.” February 2005 Issue of Healing Hands. The latest on dealing with lice, scabies, bedbugs, and more. www.nhchc.org

Designed for homeless shelter staff, ***Shelters and TB: What Staff Need to Know*** is an 18-minute training video about how to prevent the spread of TB in homeless shelters. A great video to add as part of new employee orientation for homeless agencies. Available through the Francis J. Curry National TB Center: <http://www.nationaltbcenter.edu/index.cfm>

Tuberculosis Prevention & Control Guidelines for Homeless Service Agencies in Seattle-King County. Posted at www.metrokc.gov/health/hchn, this was developed following a TB outbreak among homeless people in 2002-2003.

Advocacy Resources

The Health Care for the Homeless Mobilizer is distributed so that you can stay current on national policy developments affecting homelessness and health care. Go to www.nhchc.org and click on “Advocacy and Policy.” You will find instructions on how to subscribe – it’s free!

Policy Statements. Prepared annually by the National Health Care for the Homeless Council; full of useful data and national-level position statements on homelessness & health. Topics include Medicaid, institutional discharge, incarceration, substance abuse, children and youth, general health care, and more. www.nhchc.org

Websites

National Health Care for the Homeless Council & Clinician’s Network
<http://www.nhchc.org/>

Health Care for the Homeless Network: Public Health – Seattle & King County
<http://www.metrokc.gov/health/hchn/index.htm>

Health Care for the Homeless Information Resource Center
<http://www.bphc.hrsa.gov/hchirc/>